

Transcript of Remarks By Reagan About Iran

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's address in Washington last night, as recorded by The New York Times:

Good evening. I know you've been reading, seeing and hearing a lot of stories the past several days attributed to Danish sailors, unnamed observers at Italian ports and Spanish harbors, and especially unnamed Government officials of my Administration. Well, now you're going to hear the facts from a White House source, and you know my name.

I wanted this time to talk with you about an extremely sensitive and profoundly important matter of foreign policy.

For 18 months now, we have had under way a secret diplomatic initiative to Iran. That initiative was undertaken for the simplest and best of reasons:

¶To renew a relationship with the nation of Iran;

¶To bring an honorable end to the bloody six-year war between Iran and Iraq;

¶To eliminate state-sponsored terrorism and subversion, and

¶To effect the safe return of all hostages.

Without Iran's cooperation, we cannot bring an end to the Persian Gulf war; without Iran's concurrence, there can be no enduring peace in the Middle East.

Our Dealings With Iran

For 10 days now, the American and world press have been full of reports and rumors about this initiative and these objectives.

Now, my fellow Americans, there is an old saying that nothing spreads so quickly as a rumor. So I thought it was time to speak with you directly — to tell you first-hand about our dealings with Iran. As Will Rogers once said, "Rumor travels faster, but it don't stay put as long as truth." So let's get to the facts.

The charge has been made that the United States has shipped weapons to Iran as ransom payment for the release of American hostages in Lebanon, that the United States undercut its allies and secretly violated American policy against trafficking with terrorists.

Those charges are utterly false. The United States has not made concessions to those who hold our people captive in Lebanon. And we will not. The United States has not swapped boatloads or plane loads of American weapons for the return of American hostages. And we will not.

Reports Are Denied

Other reports have surfaced alleging U.S. involvement. Reports of a sealoft to Iran using Danish ships to carry American arms. Of vessels in Spanish ports being employed in secret U.S. arms shipments. Of Italian ports being used. Of the U.S. spending — or sending spare parts and weapons for combat aircraft. All these reports are quite exciting; but as far as we are concerned, not one of them is true.

During the course of our secret discussions, I authorized the transfer of small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems to Iran. My purpose was to convince Teheran that our negotiators were acting with my authority, to send a signal that the United States was prepared to replace the animosity between us with a new relationship. These modest deliveries, taken together, could easily fit into a single cargo plane. They could not, taken together, affect the outcome of the six-year war between Iran and Iraq — nor could they affect in any way the military balance between the two countries.

Those with whom we were in contact took considerable risks and needed a signal of our serious intent if they were to carry on and broaden the dialogue.

At the same time we undertook this initiative, we made clear that Iran must oppose all forms of international terrorism as a condition of progress in our relationship. The most significant step which Iran could take, we indicated, would be to use its influence in Lebanon to secure the release of all hostages held there.

Some progress has already been made. Since U.S. Government contact began with Iran, there's been no evidence of Iranian Government complicity in acts of terrorism against the United States. Hostages have come home — and we welcome the efforts that the Government of Iran has taken in the past and is currently undertaking.

Importance of Relationship

But why, you might ask, is any relationship with Iran important to the United States?

Iran encompasses some of the most critical geography in the world. It lies between the Soviet Union and access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Geography explains why the Soviet Union has sent an army into Afghanistan to dominate that country and, if they could, Iran and Pakistan.

Iran's geography gives it a critical position from which adversaries could interfere with oil flows from the Arab states that border the Persian Gulf. Apart from geography, Iran's oil deposits are important to the long-term health of the world economy.

For these reasons, it is in our national interest to watch for changes within Iran that might offer hope for an improved relationship. Until last year, there was little to justify that hope.

Indeed, we have bitter and enduring disagreements that persist today. At the heart of our quarrel has been Iran's past sponsorship of international terrorism. Iranian policy has been devoted to expelling all Western influence from the Middle East. We cannot abide that because our interests in the Middle East are vital. At the same time, we seek no territory or special position in Iran. The Iranian revolution is a fact of history; but between American and Iranian basic national interests there need be no permanent conflict.

Since 1983, various countries have made overtures to stimulate direct contact between the U.S. and Iran. European, Near East and Far East countries have attempted to serve as intermediaries. Despite a U.S. willingness to proceed, none of these overtures bore fruit.

With this history in mind, we were receptive last year, when we were alerted to the possibility of establishing a direct dialogue with Iranian officials.

Now, let me repeat. America's longstanding goals in the region have been to help preserve Iran's independence from Soviet domination; to bring an honorable end to the bloody Iran-Iraq War; to halt the export of subversion and terrorism in the region. A major impediment to those goals has been an absence of dialogue, a cut-off in communication between us.

It's because of Iran's strategic importance and its influence in the Islamic world that we chose to probe for a better relationship between our countries.

Our discussions continued into the spring of this year. Based upon the progress we felt we had made, we sought to raise the diplomatic level of contacts. A meeting was arranged in Teheran. I then asked my former national security adviser, Robert McFarlane, to undertake a secret mission and gave him explicit instructions. I asked him to go to Iran to open a dialogue, making stark and clear our basic objectives and disagreements.

The four days of talks were conducted in a civil fashion, and American personnel were not mistreated. Since then, the dialogue has continued and step-by-step progress continues to be made.

Let me repeat: our interests are clearly served by opening a dialogue with Iran and thereby helping to end the Iran-Iraq war. That war has dragged on for more than six years, with no prospect of a negotiated settlement. The slaughter on both sides has been enormous, and the adverse economic and political consequences for that vital region of the world have been growing. We sought to establish communication with both sides in that senseless struggle, so that we could assist in bringing about a ceasefire and, eventually, a settlement. We have sought to be even-handed by working with both sides and with other interested nations to prevent a widening of the war.

This sensitive undertaking has entailed great risk for those involved. There is no question but that we could never have begun or continued this dialogue had the initiative been disclosed earlier. Due to the publicity of the past week, the entire initiative is very much at risk today.

Precedent for Reagan Action

There is ample precedent in our history for this kind of secret diplomacy. In 1971, then-President Nixon sent his national security adviser on a secret mission to China. In that case, as today, there was a basic requirement for discretion and for a sensitivity to the situation in the nation we were attempting to engage.

Since the welcome return of former hostage David Jacobsen, there has been unprecedented speculation and countless reports that have not only been wrong, but have been potentially dangerous to the hostages and destructive of the opportunity before us. The efforts of courageous people like Terry Waite have been jeopardized. So extensive have been the false rumors and erroneous reports that the risks of remaining silent now ex-

ceed the risks of speaking out. And that's why I decided to address you tonight.

It's been widely reported, for example, that the Congress, as well as top executive branch officials, were circumvented. Although the efforts we undertook were highly sensitive and involvement of Government officials was limited to those with a strict need to know, all appropriate Cabinet officers were fully consulted. The actions I authorized were and continue to be in full compliance with Federal law, and the relevant committees of Congress are being and will be fully informed.

Efforts to End War

Another charge is that we have tilted toward Iran in the Gulf War. This, too, is unfounded. We have consistently condemned the violence on both sides. We have consistently sought a negotiated settlement that preserves the territorial integrity of both nations. The overtures we've made to the Government of Iran have not been a shift to supporting one side over the other. Rather, it has been a diplomatic initiative to gain some degree of access and influence within Iran — as well as Iraq — and to bring about an honorable end to that bloody conflict. It is in the interests of all parties in the Gulf region to end that war as soon as possible.

To summarize, our Government has a firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. That "no concessions" policy remains in force, in spite of the wildly speculative and false stories about arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments. We did not — repeat — did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages — nor will we. Those who think that we have "gone soft" on terrorism should take up the question with Colonel Qaddafi.

We have not, nor will we, capitulate to terrorists. We will, however, get on with advancing the vital interests of our great nation, in spite of terrorists and radicals who seek to sabotage our efforts and immobilize the United States.

Aims of U.S. Policy

Our goals have been, and remain:

To restore a relationship with Iran, to bring an honorable end to the war in the Gulf, to bring a halt to state-supported terror in the Middle East; and, finally, to effect the safe return of all hostages from Lebanon.

As President I have always operated on the belief that, given the facts, the American people will make the right decision. I believe that to be true now.

I cannot guarantee the outcome. But, as in the past, I ask for your support because I believe you share the hope for peace in the Middle East, for freedom for all hostages and for a world free of terrorism. Certainly there are risks in this pursuit but there are greater risks if we do not persevere.

It will take patience and understanding; it will take continued resistance to those who commit terrorist acts, and it will take cooperation with all who seek to rid the world of this scourge.